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Opinion

Russia's Poison Gases

By Christopher Chyba
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More than 100 hostages are dead after Russian authorities used an unidentified gas to incapacitate terrorists holding 750 people in a Moscow theater. Nearly all of the deaths were due to the gas, which Russian authorities have so far refused to identify.

Press coverage has rightly emphasized grief and the question of why antidotes were not immediately available. It has then focused on whether the Russians' use of gas was a violation of the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention. But this focus, while important, risks overlooking the big picture when it comes to Russian chemical weapons.

The Chemical Weapons Convention is a global treaty with more than 170 signatory nations. It bans the production, acquisition, stockpiling, transfer and use of chemical weapons -- the first arms-control treaty to outlaw an entire class of so-called weapons of mass destruction. It also requires its signatories to declare and destroy, by certain deadlines, the chemical weapons they possess.

Since the 1925 Geneva Protocol prohibiting the use of chemical and biological weapons in war -- a reaction to gas attacks in World War I -- the world has struggled to ban these weapons. In part, this is because of their indiscriminate nature.

After Sept. 11, 2001, it seems all the more important to eliminate stocks of such weapons because access to them could confer such power to terrorists. In a world with 70,000 metric tons of chemical weapons agents, some of which may be vulnerable to terrorist theft, the verified elimination of these weapons will be a step toward greater security for all. This is true despite the disturbing fact that Iraq, North Korea and certain other nations are not parties to the convention.

The weapons convention permits the production and use of riot-control agents for law enforcement purposes. Until the Russians inform us of the agent used, whether they were in violation of the convention will remain uncertain. But renewed attention to Russian chemical agents should focus on a more important issue. Russia retains some 40,000 tons of chemical warfare blister agents and nerve gas. It is required by the convention to destroy them, and the United States and European nations have agreed to help. But American efforts under the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program are stalled in Congress.

The Cooperative Threat Reduction program began in 1992. It provides expertise and funding to help the former Soviet Union secure and destroy nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and materials. Progress with chemical and biological weapons has been especially slow, and the Russians have too often been less than forthcoming.

Of particular concern has been the Russian stockpile at Shchuch'ye, a town near the southern border with Kazakhstan. The Shchuch'ye stockpile contains nearly two million artillery shells -- and hundreds of missile warheads -- filled with nerve gas or other chemical weapons. Although stockpile security has been upgraded with help from American financing, the threat of insider theft remains real. Many of the shells are in working condition, and they are small and easily transportable.

Cooperative Threat Reduction funds have paid to design a plant for construction at Shchuch'ye to destroy these weapons securely and safely. The Pentagon wants $130 million for construction in the new fiscal year. Russia, its economy still weak, won't do this without American assistance. But the program is currently stalled in a Congressional conference committee due to a disagreement over granting the president authority to proceed with the project.

The Bush administration's new national security strategy has emphasized the destruction of weapons of mass destruction by pre-emptive strikes if necessary. But at Shchuch'ye alone, the United States could destroy more than 5,000 tons of ready-to-use weapons of mass destruction through a different kind of pre-emptive strike -- action by a Congressional committee.

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